

Leruth, wasren

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See p. 21 - Baggly Creek
See also - Sept 1996 Calendar
May 1994



LeRuth's of New Orleans by Serrier of Paris

J.P. Serrier

Leruth, who lives in Pass Christian, was the chef/owner of the highly acclaimed French-Creole restaurant LeRuth's (the restaurant's sign bore the more distinguished capital "R," though his name does not) in Gretna, Louisiana, that offered New Orleans its first taste of imaginative haute cuisine back in 1965.

While those who are familiar with the New Orleans dining scene remember his restaurant, few know of his place on the shelves of American kitchens. Leruth did research for the Texas firm Anderson-Clayton, developing the creamy center of the quintessential snack food: Twinkies. At Anderson-

Photo courtesy of Warren Leruth



When Leruth opened his restaurant, he was the only chef in New Orleans baking his own bread.

Clayton, he also produced and even patented what today seems an obvious necessity: pourable, non-separating salad dressing, which became the Seven Seas line.

Ever forward-thinking, he was the first American to see the time-saving value of the French Robot Coupe (not a fancy, automated sportscar, but a machine that slices and dices!); he brought the first food processor to the United States in 1967, two years before its cousin, Cuisinart, arrived. And today, Leruth is a friend to franchises, lending his expertise to such chains as Popeye's, Church's, Chili's, and Outback Steakhouse.

But that expertise didn't come in our fast-food era of prefabricated meals that we Americans have come to accept and even expect. Instead, it originated long ago, in a five-story grocery on Royal Street.

A good Catholic boy, Warren Leruth graduated from Jesuit High School in New Orleans before heading, like many of his classmates, to Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. The Leruths were proud of their son, who was the first family member to attend college since the Civil War and who was studying physics.

But this was the late 1940s, and a campus built for 3,000 Tigers was bursting with over 10,000, most taking advantage of the G.I. Bill. The overloaded student population forced Leruth to find housing far off campus. "I used to live about 20 miles from LSU," he recalls. "And there was a bus that only made one round trip all day—it would pick you up early in the morning, and wouldn't drop you off until late at night. It was so aggravating!"

The commute, combined with overcrowded classrooms, became unbearable, and he decided to quit midway through his sophomore year. When his father, a Jax beer salesman, asked him what his plans were, Leruth was shy. "I said to him, 'If I told you what I want to do, you'd probably laugh at me.'" Much to his surprise, Leruth's father was not only supportive of his son's desire to cook, but he also helped him land a job at Solari's, an old-style gourmet grocery/deli/bakery located in the spot where Ralph and Cindy Brennan's Mr. B's stands today.

At Solari's, he was stationed on the fourth floor, the bakery, where he worked the 2 a.m. to 12 noon shift rolling pastries, mixing fondant icing, frying doughnuts, and baking pies. Yet, he says, "I was bored, so I'd stay an extra two hours to learn how to bake bread."

Still hungry to acquire new skills, Leruth offered to work part-time for no pay at the infallible bistro Galatoire's. But because the important prep cooking essential to a chef's education was done in the mornings there, during his already appropriated time at Solari's, he began baking at a neighboring hotel, where the work and hours fit better into his schedule. Galatoire's provided much of the inspiration for the rich Creole sauces of the LeRuth's menu, since Leruth held the prestigious post of saucier.

To avoid full-time military service, the aspiring chef joined the National Guard. A shortage of cooks made him a perfect candidate for the Army's baking, cooking, and food supervisory schools, and as a guardsman, he finished first in his class in all three. "There were all these career Army guys, and they couldn't believe that some new kid had beat them all," he says. Leruth had also found work aboard a bauxite-transport ship as chief steward, overseeing all dining operations.

Photo on opposite page by Steve West



Leruth (far right) describes Yul Brynner, his favorite celebrity customer, as "a gourmand."



Photo courtesy of Warren Leruth

A stopover in Rotterdam, Holland, after a rough sail across the choppy North Atlantic provided a much-needed break—in fact, he used the funds his father sent him for the trip back

at Anderson-Clayton. But he knew that the only way he was going to be able to comfortably support his wife and their two young sons, Larry and Lee, was to own his own business.

Leruth had such strong visions for his restaurant that, he says, "We could have opened in a cemetery and it would have been a success."

Though he had gotten out of the restaurant trade (after working at Diamond Jim Moran's, the Monteleone Hotel, the Andrew Jackson restaurant in the French Quarter, the Shamrock Hotel in Houston, and Constantin's in Mobile, among others), he figured if he ran things his way, he could give his family the life they deserved. After running one

the kitchen before they got to junior high.) In his 1987 review, former food critic Gene Bourg of the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* praised the items that had helped establish the restaurant's name and had gone on to become staples of new Creole cuisine.

"Warren Leruth's gems," Bourg wrote, "included a stunning oyster and artichoke soup (often copied but never really matched), an ethereal dish of little fried buster crabs blanket-ed in lumps of crabmeat and seasoned butter, a marinated rack of lamb served with featherlight fried parsley, and an array of fresh-fruit ices and ice creams that, after two decades, remain unchallenged for downright goodness."

Other keys to success, says one self-described "old New Orleanian," were "all these little touches." For instance, for women, she says, "They brought out a pillow and put it under your feet, which was great, because I remember how tired my feet were one night. They really tried to make it exotic."

Those little touches didn't go unnoticed by the powers-that-be in the food service industry,

home to finance a longer stay. After a third request for money, a telegram arrived that said simply, "Walk."

Leruth found the Virgin Islands to be a convenient destination, too; he "accidentally" missed the boat back. When the Army realized what had happened, they gave him the option of being drafted for service in San Juan or at home in the States. Leruth smiles, remembering how long it took to choose. "I had been to Puerto Rico before, and there was no way!" he says.

Then, in 1952, Private Warren Leruth was sent to Korea, where he became personal chef to General Bruce C. Clark. On special occasions, he cooked for such dignitaries as then Vice President Richard Nixon and Korean President Syngman Rhee, under the new designation of warrant officer, junior grade.

Returning home, Leruth met and married Marie, his wife of many years. He then had stints at Procter and Gamble, researching Duncan Hines cake mix; at the bakery and confectionery supply firm Charles Dennery and Company; and

LeRuth's successfully in Sherman, Texas, and selling it to the local country club, he returned to New Orleans to try the same idea again.

In 1965, he bought a small Victorian cottage, "on the wrong side of the Mississippi," as he puts it, on the West Bank in Gretna because city real estate prices even then were too steep for his budget, and he set about fixing it up.

An early proponent of the optimistic "If you build it, they will come" philosophy, he had such strong visions for his restaurant that, he says, "We could have opened in a cemetery and it would have been a success." Being a restaurant, the primary key to that success, obviously, was the food.

At its opening, LeRuth's was the only restaurant in New Orleans baking its own French bread and churning its own ice cream. (And it probably had the youngest chefs, too: sons Larry and Lee were helping their father in

LeRuth's was one of only 13 restaurants to receive the *Mobil Guide's* five-star rating, which it earned for five consecutive years.

either. In 1977, LeRuth's received the *Mobil Guide's* five-star rating, given to only 13 restaurants in the country, and continued to earn the coveted rating for the next four years. A 1973 *States-Item* critic called it the best

restaurant in New Orleans, and in 1987, it earned the highest accolade, five beans, from the *Times-Picayune*.

But all those awards, initially the source of great pride, became a burden. "People would come in, demanding proof of those five stars," Leruth says. "You know, like, 'Show me.' It was obnoxious." He also was annoyed by the celebrities who came in, expecting all of New Orleans to be like Bourbon Street and surprised that their behavior was inappropriate in this little oasis of civility.

Some knew better, including Tom Cruise, Walter Cronkite, Sebastian Cabot, and Spiro Agnew, all of whom ate at Leruth's restaurant. Yul Brynner was one of Leruth's favorite customers. Despite a somewhat inauspicious first meeting (Leruth had to distinguish himself from a cloying autograph hound), they went on to become good friends, after each discovered the other's fine taste. "I had probably 15 meals with him," Leruth says. "What a gourmand! He would never drink a Bordeaux less than 20 years old."

Finding a wine of that age was easy in the LeRuth's cellar, which was really the old house's attic. In its time, it boasted 17,000 shrewdly picked bottles, no small feat considering that Leruth is a self-taught sommelier, mostly from Frank Schoonmaker's *Encyclopedia of Wine*. After summers touring the Latour and Rothschild vineyards, he has slipped easily into the European attitude toward wine. Europeans tend to think of wine as just a drink, meant as a pleasing complement to a meal, to cleanse the palate, while Americans seem to believe that one must be a wine connoisseur to truly enjoy it.

Leruth feels that wine can and should be enjoyed by everyone, regardless of their knowledge about it. In the forward to his *LeRuth's Front Door-Back Door Cookbook*, he writes, "I've always considered a meal without wine somehow incomplete."

LeRuth's closed in 1991, due in part to the advent of a declining economy and the degradation of its Gretna neighborhood. Still, Warren, Larry, and Lee Leruth's food lives on in the pages of two cookbooks. The recipes included at left were selected from *LeRuth's Front Door-Back Door Cookbook* and from *LeRuth's 20th Anniversary Cookbook*. 